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SUBJECT: Special Media Reaction: President Obama's initial days spark optimism tinged with caution

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Summary  
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¶1. The Moroccan press has widely and enthusiastically covered the major events of President Obama's first few weeks in office, highlighting the messages directed to the Muslim world in his inaugural address, the initial decisions to close Gitmo and CIA secret prisons and restrict interrogation techniques, and the appointment of Senator Mitchell. Editorial commentary has been favorable across the spectrum, tempered with a healthy dose of caution that the Moroccans will judge President Obama by his deeds, and not words. The press stressed in particular the importance of making rapid progress on the Middle East peace process. Coverage and reaction to the Al-Arabiya interview has thus far been fairly limited, most likely because of the channel's limited local audience. Some Moroccan commentators continue to use the Obama election as a rhetorical tool to promote greater transparency and democracy in domestic politics. The Mission has actively engaged the media to promote President Obama's new messages and policies. End summary.

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Happy to Meet You  
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¶2. In addition to the themes highlighted above, many local newspapers noted favorably that President Obama chose Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas for his first phone call with a world leader, and highlighted President Obama's promise of a "new approach" in the Muslim world. Some observed that he insisted on stating his middle name ("Hussein") during the oath of office. The press widely reported on the message of congratulations sent by King Mohammed VI to President Obama, with several newspapers observing that it was one of the first such messages transmitted by a world leader. The press highlighted that the King urged President Obama "to achieve a definitive, peaceful and global, just and lasting solution to the conflict [in the Middle East], a settlement that will put an end to the drama of the Palestinian people, guaranteeing for them the right to create an independent, viable state living in peace and harmony, side by side with the State of Israel."

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Hope, but Caution  
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¶3. The blanket factual coverage was bolstered by a substantial amount of commentary. Media commentators expressed enormous relief that the Bush tenure was over, joined with genuine hope and optimism about Obama's promises of change. As one independent daily reported, "After waiting for a long time, America finally has the President it deserves: charismatic, modern, determined, cool, and deeply attached to good old American values." Other headlines included, "Promise made; promise kept," and "[We're] not dreaming."

¶4. In the same breath, many commentators evinced skepticism that

Obama would be able to fulfill his commitments, urging readers to judge him by his deeds, not his words. As the director of a left-of-center daily wrote: "Obama's future administration [...] is comprised of men and women who will be more concerned about the restoration of American capitalist power than by the establishment of a new world order based on justice, equity in trade, and the rights of peoples to live in peace, without domination. This is the reason why we are waiting for Barack Obama's actions to judge him on the evidence." A socialist daily wrote: "There was ... one certainty in [Obama's] speech: the world will not be as vile as it was under George Bush. One must certainly wait for his acts to judge the [new president], but the signals that he sent allowed [us] to detect promises of a better world."

15. On the Middle East peace process: Prior to the Mitchell nomination, commentators had expressed residual anger over their sense that Obama had been insensitive to the suffering of Gazans, citing frequently his refusal to comment on the situation prior to his inauguration. As one independent newspaper director wrote: "If Barack Obama does not adopt an enlightened position on a conflict that has shaken the whole world, he will disappoint millions of people throughout the world, and not only in the Arab and Muslim countries. The break [with the past] that has been so publicized would be taken as unimportant election rhetoric, and realpolitik would once again win." Another wrote on the day after the inauguration: "Barack Obama has kept silent over the course of three weeks, while Israel finished its terrorist carnage in Gaza ... Obama's hands are not tied behind his back today, as he has argued before, and there are some people who still see in him a ray of hope; Gaza will be his first test for Arab and Muslim public opinion. ... The Arab world is looking forward today to hearing from Obama what he

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has said to his own people: 'Yes we can' find a solution to the Palestinian cause and bring to an end the six-decade-long tragedy of a stricken people."

16. This tone changed somewhat after the Mitchell nomination. Moroccan journalists reacted with cautious optimism to the appointment, lauding his qualifications and even-handedness (citing his Lebanese roots), while questioning whether the USG was really ready to take the difficult steps necessary to promote progress. One prominent Islamist journalist told IO that, while he admired Mitchell personally, the latter's hands were tied by his mandate; unless the USG was willing to engage Hamas directly in negotiations, there was no hope for a solution to the conflict.

17. The Moroccan press has paid President Obama's interview with Al-Arabiya far less attention; only a handful of newspapers provided wire service coverage, and/or summaries of the main points. The Moroccan blogosphere - one of the most active in the Arab world - has also been surprisingly mute about the interview. The very limited local commentary has (again) been cautiously positive. As one newspaper director put it: "Our experience with the American administration taught us to fear building our hopes on the sands of declarations, it also taught us not to raise our hopes too high, so that if the edifice crumbles, the shock will be milder; we fear even hope now." (Note: very few Moroccans watch Al-Arabiya, which may explain the relative lack of coverage and commentary. End note.)

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Whither our Democratic Values?  
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18. Moroccan journalists continue to use reporting on the American elections process as a tool to criticize the lack (as they see it) of transparency and genuine democratic values in Morocco, a trend post observed throughout the American election season. One leading newspaper director, noted for his fiery criticism of the Moroccan Government, commented that the American media was giving President Obama no honeymoon, as it had already begun to publicly track his performance against the commitments he made as a candidate. He contrasted this with the indifference of the Moroccan press and citizenry, writing: "Who among you remembers the numerous promises made by the majority parties that constitute the government of Abbas El Fassi?"

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Full-court Press by Mission  
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¶9. The Mission has assumed an active posture in publicizing the initial activities of the Obama administration related to the Arab and Muslim world. CDA Jackson did a radio interview about the new administration shortly after the inauguration, IO Ranz gave television, radio and several print interviews on the Mitchell appointment, and PolOff Brownstein conducted a radio interview on the Mitchell appointment. Embassy Rabat and Dar America in Casablanca each hosted a DVC on the new administration, organized by ARS Paris, with French-speaking American professors; the largest French-language daily reported in depth on comments made during the Dar America DVC. Dar America also focused its weekly Thursday forum on January 22 on the inaugural process and the role of the executive; Casablanca PAO Chakrawarti was the speaker. In support of these efforts, the Mission has also widely distributed IIP Arabic- and French-language products about the transition, notably the Arabic-language transcript of the interview with Al-Arabiya.

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